

Nellie Mae Education Foundation District Level Systems Change, 2010
Letter of Intent – Burlington School District (BSD) and Winooski School Districts (WSD)

1. Need

a. Describe the district's student-centered learning needs.

The adjoining communities of Burlington and Winooski share Vermont's neediest student population, with almost 20% of students living in poverty and over 50% qualifying for free or reduced price school meals. Our communities contain almost 80% of the entire ELL (English Language Learners) student population of the state, and the unique needs of these students cannot be met by traditional methods. The road map to success for all at-risk students points clearly to student-centered learning. Providing alternative pathways shows promise, compared with traditional tracking into lower level courses. Although initiatives to address truancy and promote high school completion have had significant impact on graduation and dropout rates, this is not sufficient. Area business leaders recently decried the increase of teens and young adults who are "unemployable...not well-spoken enough to get jobs." (Briggs, 2010)

Our districts have initiated specialized student-centered initiatives that hold significant promise for the larger student population as well. These programs allow competency-based completion of high school, participation in community-centered internships, use of online self-paced instructional resources, programs to increase parent involvement, 1:1 netbook programs, and programs to promote student health and decrease truancy. However, to meet the increasing needs of our student population and to promote student success system-wide, we need to fully implement and bring to scale these student-centered learning initiatives that engage students in any-time any-place learning, offer authentic community-based learning opportunities, feature parent and community engagement, and evaluate success based on competencies.

Key to putting the needs, abilities, and interests of students first is the Personalized Learning Plan (PLP). By including services located outside of the traditional education system as part of the PLP, there is more commitment by the community to our youth, and a greater chance of educational success. Linking Learning to Life, Vermont Adult Learning and the high schools have been able, over the last four years, to take the best of each world – academics, college readiness, internships, and guidance - and use it as appropriate with students.

We propose that each student develop a PLP with the active involvement of school staff, parents, and community members. Each plan will articulate graduation learning outcomes with target goals each year in core subjects and 21st century themes and skills; identify on and off-campus course and learning opportunities; outline how progress will be assessed through demonstrations and portfolio compilations; and chart a course for post-secondary learning, including admission to college and/or technical training. We request support from the Nellie Mae Foundation to implement PLP district-wide in Winooski and Burlington and to coordinate and bring to scale existing programs in order to maximize success for as many students as possible.

b. Share data that provides a sense of the strengths and weaknesses of the district and unmet needs, particularly those pertaining to underserved students.

Weaknesses and Unmet Needs:

BSD and WSD students consistently have among the highest juvenile arrest, truancy, drug and alcohol use, poverty and other risk factor rates in the state. At least 43% of Burlington middle- and high-school students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Sixty-two percent of the 295 Winooski High School students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Burlington is the largest, most diverse community in the state, with far higher than state average rates of poverty and other risk factors. BSD is Vermont's largest school district, with over 3500 students PK-12. Neighboring

Winooski, a community of 6,318 residents, serves 802 students PK-12.

Burlington and Winooski are the primary resettlement area for refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, Bosnia, Croatia, Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, Somalia, the Sudan and other areas. New arrivals have significant educational, social, and employment challenges. Our students speak more than 52 different languages and dialects, including languages for which there is no written component. Many students come to us without any formal education. Often we see high school students who have never used a pencil or paper and adults without elementary skills who need education, but also to support their families. Recent data compiled for the Federal Office of Civil Rights Data Collection show that Burlington has 515 of 3502 students with limited English proficiency (15%), and 947 students whose race/ethnicity is not listed as white (27%).

Emerging research shows that half of all dropouts can be identified in middle school by four key measures: failing grade in math or English, chronic tardiness/absenteeism, and a pattern of discipline referrals. (Balfanz et al, 2007). A recent study of students at one of the Burlington middle schools found that among the 380 students, 40 have a failing grade in math, 32 have a failing grade in English, 10-15 are chronically absent, and there have been 22 suspensions in the first few months of school. According to Balfanz (2007), a student with just *one* of these indicators in grade 6 has between a 10-20% chance of on-time high school graduation.

Winooski's graduation rate is 63% using the state 4-year graduation requirements, with a drop out rate of 7.5% as compared to the state drop out rate of 2.8% for grades 9-12. Many ELL, immigrant, and other high-needs students drop out with parent permission, more evidence of the need for improved parent communication and student engagement. Burlington's cohort graduation rate for four-year graduates is 86% (89% five years). BHS's annual drop-out rate last year was 3.01%, thanks to the partnerships that have developed with the High School Completion Program, BSD's Truancy Prevention Program, and other alternative school and community-based programs. Continuing and expanding these partnerships, with increased opportunities for rigor and applied academic learning, will continue graduation trends and build a set of best practices to disseminate regionally and nationally.

On the state level, funding decreases as the number of refugees decreases, but services are not priced per pupil. Although the state is creating an online virtual school using the Florida Virtual School model—which could make a huge difference for at-risk students—students without ready access to online learning tools outside of school will not have this advantage. Personalized and available around the clock, programs like these can make the difference between dropping out and graduating on-time, or even early, for the students who can access them. But the factors that commonly threaten student success—poverty, language, disengaged parents—also stand in the way of accessing these programs.

Strengths

Our districts have grappled with these challenges for many years, and developed practices and partnerships to improve student outcomes. These include an extensive network of Home School Liaisons and parent outreach efforts, a free student-driven afterschool program including middle and high schools, a School-Based Health Center at BHS, online learning opportunities in both districts, strong partnerships with Vermont Adult Learning (VAL), the Tarrant Institute for Innovative Education (TIIE), Linking Learning to Life (LLL), and other alternative programs, and comprehensive restructuring at Winooski.

Another strength our districts share is the infrastructure and capacity to support student-centered learning within our schools. All schools have access to broadband network infrastructure hard-wired to every classroom, and both high schools have made significant

progress toward wireless access throughout. Burlington also has a public utility with capacity to provide broadband fiber connections to every home in our high poverty areas.

For several years, teachers and students at Winooski High School have sought to integrate student voice into meaningful decision-making. Through their recent participation in the Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together initiative, teachers and students engaged in focused and ongoing training and collaboration with other schools around Vermont to learn and implement strategies to involve students in reform of school operations and curriculum.

Successful programs targeting high school completion use alternative competency-based methods (VAL); improve student employment and high school completion outcomes through connections to community and authentic educational experiences (LLL); and improve outcomes for English Language Learners with high school completion (LLL). In addition, BSD partnered with TIIE to initiate a pilot program this year, engaging 20% of the learners at one BSD middle school, to develop more personalized student-centered learning, authentic experiences, and student and parent engagement through a one-to-one laptop program. There are also strong initiatives for parent involvement, and efforts connecting students, teachers and parents through an online grade system to allow immediate performance feedback, used by 100% of the teachers at one middle school (85% overall) and 90% of the teachers at one high school.

2. Student-Centered Learning

a. How does the community (defined as individuals and organizations connected directly to the work of the school system e.g. parents, students, and organizations that work to empower parents and students etc.) define student-centered learning? Is there agreement?

In order to support struggling students and transform teaching and learning, Burlington and Winooski High Schools have undertaken initiatives this year to more clearly define student-centered learning and understand the elements common to schools focused on the learning needs of students. A common definition of student-centered learning emerged from community-wide conversations. Student-centered learning means that each student achieves high expectations with “the when, where, and with whom” becoming the variables. Key elements to individualizing student paths for learning include:

Personalization and Individualization: Individual student questions, interests, pace and capacities are central to curriculum and demonstrations of learning, with varied ways to assess student progress, including learning in core subjects that prepare students for post-secondary success.

Student Voice: Students are protagonists in their own right, empowered seekers and leaders. Students are central to, and can lead, program design, curriculum, instruction, and assessment, identifying which learning and assessment options best meet their needs and interests.

Relevance: Students engage questions, use technologies, and develop skills relevant to their world. Technologies and collaborative dynamics embraced by students outside of school are harnessed for the learning and growth valued by students, parents, community, and educators.

Authenticity: Students identify and engage in work worth doing, meaningfully collaborate with peers, and present to “real-world” audiences. Students present to and interact with the broader audience of their classmates, peers, community members, and limitless online audience, with multiple options for active and applied learning in and out of the traditional classroom, with a variety of adults guiding and supporting students.

These tenets are echoed throughout the state. In the recent policy document, *Vermont Secondary Schools for the 21st Century*, the Vermont State Board of Education identified the strategic area of 21st Century Learning Contexts:

Flexible schedules, technology and teaching practices support students to learn in

collaboration and through relevant, real-world applications and experiences. Students engage with real-world information, data, tools and community/world experts as they conduct research, complete meaningful projects and solve problems. Learning is not dependent on time or location. High quality and extended learning experiences outside the school walls (e.g. internships; early college experiences; service learning; special projects; business experiences; distance learning) are equally important to student learning as classroom-based courses.

The partners in this application for a planning grant agree on the above definition of student-centered learning, and incorporate it into their programs, described in part below.

b. What programs, curriculum, approaches etc. are planned or in place using this definition?

Burlington and Winooski school districts already have several programs and curricula in place that align with the above definition. Both schools participate in online learning options, including the Vermont Virtual Learning Cooperative, Vermont's online school that makes possible credit recovery and any-time any-place learning.

Over the past several months, Winooski High School has surveyed students, parents, community members, and teachers about what they think should happen to make the school a place where serious learning takes place and is a priority. The responses have been consistent across the board. The curriculum needs to be more rigorous and challenging but more flexible at the same time. Teachers need to learn the learning styles of the students they teach and modify their teaching methods to adapt to the different styles of the students. Assignments and student work need to be varied and be driven by the objective of the assignment. Learning should be project-based, hands on, and relevant to the students.

Linking Learning to Life (LLL), a non-profit community-based organization housed at BHS, provides youth with hands-on, real-life experiences to help them succeed in careers, college, and community. LLL's programs and services include mentoring, community-based learning, service learning, job shadowing, student internships, career exploration, job placement with local businesses, youth leadership development, and dual enrollment and college access opportunities for high school aged youth. LLL engages over 5,000 students across the state.

Vermont Adult Learning (VAL) provides adults (16 y/o +) with essential skills education to further their educational, employment, and personal goals in order to expand their options and capabilities in the family, community, and workplace. VAL also provides alternative credentialing options for students without a high school diploma, including GED, Adult Diploma Program and High School Completion Program (HSCP). Students in HSCP have access to everything a community has to offer, from co-enrollment in area colleges to vocational certificates (culinary, construction, weatherization, dental tech, etc.) Academic instruction is through project-based learning so students create their own context and integrate skills within each project. Whatever makes sense for a student to learn from and then be assessed by can be part of an individualized student learning/graduation plan.

In collaboration with BSD, the Tarrant Institute for Innovative Education (TIIE) has provided a team of middle school students with a student-centered, technology-rich educational environment in an initiative called I-LEAP. Through this program, TIIE is conducting research to examine the link between this environment, student engagement, and personalized learning, particularly among student populations at risk of low academic performance, high school dropout, and low postsecondary academic aspirations. This program, in its first year at one of BSD's middle schools, has had a tremendous positive impact and has created champions of personalized student learning in the teachers, students and students' families who are

experiencing it. Parents are eager to talk about the difference the program makes for their child!

Support from the Nellie Mae Foundation would enable us to bring to scale these existing promising programs built on student-centered learning, as well as to implement widely the PLP-centered approach mentioned in section 1.

c. How are practices, policies and demand currently inhibiting or supporting student-centered learning? What momentum is in place to propel change in your district?

Critical 21st century skills, such as the ability to communicate effectively, work in a team environment, think critically and problem solve, take initiative, and access and analyze information, can best be gained through partnerships with community based organizations that support hands-on experiences with community employers who utilize these skills daily to remain competitive. In the Burlington and Winooski communities, we build strong partnerships and collaborative ventures between educators, employers, and community intermediary organizations that bring them together to meet the career and college preparation needs of our students. These opportunities are currently available to a relatively small number of students but should be an integral part of the high school experience for all students.

Also in support of student centered learning, BSD has extensive recent experience engaging the entire community in planning and task forces. In the last four years these have included: major facilities review to bring schools into the 21st century; an excellence and equity initiative resulting in two magnet schools; and an extensive process to increase diversity and representation of under-represented groups among faculty and administration. Front Porch Forum, a neighborhood-based social networking tool, has been an integral part of these initiatives.

To achieve the same end of student-centered learning, after meeting with stakeholders in Winooski, WSD concluded that traditional academics, curriculum and grading systems designed for past generations are no longer enough to prepare students for the demands they will face. Despite efforts by teachers to personalize learning, schools still assume that all students learn largely in the same way and at the same pace. In 2009, the Vermont State Board of Education's Transformation Policy Commission included in its recommendations that schools move towards proficiency-based grading, promotion, and graduation requirements. WSD is in the process of fully aligning its K-12 curriculum, which will be completed by the end of the 2010-2011 school year. The next stage of that process is developing district policies to ensure that each learner will be continually supported with flexible and personalized learning opportunities to attain state standards. In this model, learning will continue until the student has demonstrated full proficiency in meeting learning expectations and his/her personal learning plan.

At a BSD middle schools, TIE expected and faced barriers to technology-rich and student-centered learning, including school board reluctance, parental fears over students' responsibility for laptops and having 24/7 uncensored access, hardware and building configuration challenges, lack of internet access at home, and others. Research and consultation with other programs experiencing these same challenges offered perspective and tools to address concerns. A parent council helped tackle the challenges of at-home, technology-intensive learning, including insuring out-of-school access to the internet for all students. Educators at EMS faced the challenge of balancing the tension between old and new expectations. While they worked to transform curriculum, the transformation of planning time structures, teacher evaluations, daily schedules, and other holdovers from "learning in rows" did not change. TIE works with principals and superintendents to support these broader transformations. Although it is too early to determine long term effects of the program, short term outcomes have been

impressive.

Through these efforts towards transformation, both districts are learning important lessons: formal, rigorous professional development, in addition to in-class training and support, is vital; support is necessary for school and district leaders to implement change and garner resources to shift into the 21st Century; systematic engagement of parents and community as resources and advocates is crucial; professional learning communities, building-based, that prepare teachers for changes in practice and proactively engage with obstacles is critical to successful transformation .

3. Vision

a. Describe your vision for implementing student-centered learning in your community.

PURPOSE: Prepare to implement student-centered, technology-rich learning across two Vermont school districts with particular focus on improving outcomes for ELL and secondary students, our strategy will:

- be research-based
- achieve crucial alignment throughout educational systems
- transform curricula and assessment around 24/7 learning
- prepare students with 21st century skills
- prioritize and enable successful post-secondary transitions

The initiative will be embedded in the community, aligned with ongoing efforts and resources, and is both scalable and sustainable. Our goal is 24/7 personalized learning for all students. We will focus on moving beyond “coursework,” expanding our understanding of what, how, and when students learn (Puentedura, 2006). The key components of the vision reflect the definition of student-centered learning in the previous section.

GOAL 1: Engage students, educators, administrators, parents, and community members in ongoing dialogue to transform education through student-centered, technology-rich learning.

Outcome A: In addition to building on research-based best practices, the intervention model is grounded firmly in the experience, identity and needs of local communities, including the rich diversity of ELL communities;

Outcome B: Critical constituencies, as above, at every level are invested in the model, increasing effectiveness and improving long-term viability.

GOAL 2: Identify and understand policy and procedural barriers within schools and districts in order to address them. While important progress has been made in Vermont at the classroom, team and school levels, we lack examples of successful district-level transformation that is student-centered and technology-rich. Equally important as the cultivation of support and design of proactive interventions through a collaborative design process, is the elimination of barriers – particularly those that cross schools and community-based education organizations. This work can serve as a beacon for the rest of the state.

Outcome A: Policy, procedural, and situational barriers understood by all stakeholders;

Outcome B: Priorities for addressing established attitudes and beliefs that create barriers to transformative efforts;

Outcome C: Multi-lateral strategies and partnerships are built, creating capacity to make change that supports successful student centered, technology rich learning for students at risk, particularly ELL students.

GOAL 3: Develop strategies to increase the expectation, motivation and supports necessary for students to learn 24/7, and instill patterns of life-long learning.

Outcome A: District-wide technology needs and priorities clearly understood and a

sustainable 1:1 laptop rollout strategy is developed;

Outcome B: A research-based, long-term professional development plan in place to support student-centered, technology-rich learning;

Outcome C: Burlington and Winooski High Schools prepared to implement Personal Learning Plans for all students, with particular attention to at-risk students;

Outcome D: Coordinated and expanded efforts give students access to dual-enrollment and college access and other incentives to pursue higher education;

Outcome E: Coordinated and expanded efforts give students access to meaningful real-world internships, job shadowing, and other workplace experience.

b. What changes are needed to implement this vision?

For Goal 1: Engage students, educators, administrators, parents, and community members in a focused conversation on transforming education through student-centered, technology-rich learning.

- Students must assume new leadership, both at the personal and system level
- School-wide implementation of “teaming” with direct involvement and support of administrators, counselors, social workers, etc.
- Cultivation and support of parents, in whatever ways work for them, in the learning plans of students and project initiatives
- Community understanding of and support for transformative practices, including a secondary credential that can be earned inside and outside high school walls.

For Goal 2: Identify and understand policy and procedural barriers within schools and districts in order to address them.

- Graduation expectations rooted in 21st c. skills rather than the “credit” requirements
- Common planning time for teaching teams
- Prioritized out-of-class professional development time for educators
- Restructured teacher evaluation processes

For Goal 3: Develop strategies to increase the expectation, motivation and supports necessary for students to learn 24/7, and instill patterns of life-long learning.

- Sufficient technology, including 1:1 laptop for take-home computing
- Capacity to offer PLP to all students including: plan creation/management, dual enrollment in college courses, work-readiness experiences
- Professional development to transform curricula and align students’ in-school and out-of-school learning and technology use
- Student achievements integrated into an electronic personalized learning plan.

4. Planning

a. Who are the key members of the planning process?

See attached appendix: DLSC Partnership Chart

b. Describe your planning activities and process.

Planning activities and processes fall into three stages. An overall grant planning team will coordinate and bring together the work of school planning teams at Burlington and Winooski High Schools. Specific configuration of each element will vary in response to the opportunities and challenges present in each school. Students will participate at every level as equal members in the planning processes, reflecting a heterogeneous mix from the schools’ populations.

Stage 1-Engagement: The connection between the school and its greater community will be integrated into the transformation and become second nature on both sides. Students will see relevance and the community will share in the student growth, experience, and responsibility.

The action plan will include clear strategies and outcomes for incorporating community resources and opportunities into students' personal learning plans.

Stage 2-Research: Examine and evaluate best practices and transformation models. Interview and conduct surveys of stakeholders, including students, teachers, parents, community members and partnerships. Identify schools across the country that report positive results in improving student engagement and learning, increased graduation rates, and increased rates of post-secondary learning through personalized learning.

Stage 3-Design Process: Each school will develop a vision for transforming the educational experience at the school, based on result of research and site visits. This vision will come from all major stakeholders and be presented to the community for approval, smoothing the way for transformation with minimized resistance. Specific action steps will be identified to move the school from its current practice to the transformation vision.

c. How would you allocate planning grant resources?

Funds from the Planning Grant will be allocated towards the following:

- Travel-expenses to visit sites identified through research and technical assistance from Nellie Mae
- Pay for substitute teachers to enable participation in research, planning and visitation
- Student and teacher stipends for time to work on the planning and visitation process
- Stipends for partners' staff to work on research, planning, and visitation process
- Translation Services to facilitate participation to the fullest, both oral and printed
- Childcare to allow community parents to participate in the process fully
- Food and beverages for the community discussions and information-gathering forums
- Printing and publishing costs including a variety of languages
- Facilitator expenses as needed for meetings
- 0.50 FTE Project Planning Coordinator

d. What Technical Assistance do you envision needing during the Planning Process?

We envision requiring Technical Assistance in three areas:

1. RESEARCH

- a. identify and connect with schools, districts, and their partners in New England who have successfully implemented components of our vision for student-centered learning
- b. conduct focus groups in the community, with facilitators with expertise in student-centered learning, to gather input from stakeholders about a shared vision for change

2. COMMUNICATION:

- a. In order to address resistance among school personnel, parents, students, and community members, assistance in framing and messaging to build public understanding and demand for transformation
- b. develop messages and a communications plan about student-centered learning that will build support for our proposed model.

3. POLICY DEVELOPMENT

- a. identify and explore models for building state-level support for districts undertaking transformation toward personalized learning. For example, which states or organizations have altered or suspended state education statutes that impede local progress?
- b. assistance for an effective and experienced state level advocacy organization, Voices for Vermont Children, with developing a state-level policy agenda

Thank you for your consideration!